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ABSTRACT

In recent years, communication research has examined the patterns of communicative behavior that manifest themselves normally across populations and situations. This study explored the relationship between two of these patterns, individual (trait) and situational (state) conditions of supportive and defensive communication. Subjects were 120 university undergraduate students, selected according to scores on an A-E scale that rated them as either problem solving or dogmatic. A supportive-defensive instrument was then administered whereby pairs of students discussed perceptions of eight personality profiles. After the discussion, subjects rated their own perception of the situation on a supportive-defensive scale. Analysis of the data support the following conclusions: a supportive or a defensive style can be attributed to certain characteristic modes of behavior; problem solving pairs tended to establish supportive climates while dogmatic pairs tended to establish defensive climates; and attempts to eliminate alternative options within the situation produced significant increases of defensive communication. (Based on the findings, the paper proposes and discusses four questions for future research.) (MAI)

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DEFENSIVE COMMUNICATION AS TRAIT AND STATE

by

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DEFENSIVE COMMUNICATION AS TRAIT AND STATE

In recent years, there has been a certain amount of interest in studying communicative "types," that is, patterns of communicative behavior which manifest themselves normally across populations and situations. Examples of this interest have been the studies of rhetorical sensitivity (Hart and Burks, 1972; Hart, Eadie and Carlson, 1975), reticence (Phillips and Metzger, 1973), and communication apprehension (Lamb, 1972; McCroskey, in press). Especially with regard to the last "type" research has identified stable distributions of both individual and situational characteristics which will affect the manifestation of apprehensive behavior. These conditions have been labeled by McCroskey (in press) as being "trait" and "state."

This study investigated the trait and state manifestations of another well-known but little-studied communication phenomenon, that which is represented by a continuum with one pole being labeled "defensive communication" and the other pole being labeled "supportive communication." The purpose of the research was to see if communicators could be identified whose general style of message-making could be called "supportive" or "defensive" as well as to investigate some of the conditions under which supportive or defensive communication would be exhibited.

The paradigm under which the study was conducted was first suggested by Giffin (1969) in a review of the literature on interpersonal trust. Giffin, who equated supportive communication with the communicative outcomes of interpersonal trust, wrote that trust was influenced by three general

factors: (1) the personalities of the participants, (2) the situation in which the participants find themselves, and (3) the interpersonal perceptions the participants generate through their mutual interaction.

There has been little investigation of defensive or supportive communication as resulting from individual traits. There have been, however, some suggestions that researchers have recognized such types while conducting their observations. Stephenson and D'Angelo (1973), for example, expressed their frustration at being unsuccessful in fully manipulating an "empathic" or "evaluative" listening situation by recommending that confederates be "type cast" for future research of this nature. Moreover, in a review of cooperative and competitive behavior as functions of trust in the gaming situation, Kelley and Stahelski (1970) came to three conclusions:

- (1) There are two stable types of individuals which may be described approximately as cooperative and competitive personalities. (This could be more accurately, perhaps, by reference to stable individual differences along a dimension from cooperation to competition, but the terminology of "types" greatly simplifies the exposition of this argument.)
- (2) These two types have different views of their worlds, specifically of what other people are like with respect to this typology or dimension.
- (3) These different views can be accounted for most simply in terms of the differential experience of the two types in their social interactions. (p. 66)

The potential identification of supportive and defensive communicators has been somewhat hampered by a faulty assumption about the relationship between defensiveness and defensive communication. A number of psychological researchers have employed instruments such as the Repression-Sensitization

Scale (Byrne, Barry, and Nelson, 1963) as measures of defensive style. The problem with such measurement is that the opposite end of the scale identifies a somewhat malleable sort of individual, a type having a high need for approval. Darnell and Brockreide (1976) have labeled this person the "rhetorical reflector," and this individual's communicative style is not at all likely to be supportive. In fact, what these researchers may actually be measuring is social attitudinal rigidity, which could be one, but not the only, cause of defensive communication. Consequently, a proclivity toward defensiveness might manifest itself as defensive communication, but its opposite might not be a reliable trait predictor of supportive communication. What would be needed, therefore, would be a measure that would predict both defensive and supportive communication behavior.

Such a measure appeared to be an instrument called the A-B Scale. First developed by Whitehorn and Betz (1954) as a discriminator of therapist style, the behavioral correlates of the two types identified by the scale closely match those typically described as belonging on a supportive-defensive continuum. In reviewing these correlates, Razin (1971) noted that "A" individuals tended to be problem-solvers (as opposed to regulators or controllers), while "B" individuals tended to be more dogmatic, to see situations in "black-and-white" terms. A's valued self-determination over obedience, while B's valued conformity, deference, rigidity, mechanicalness, rule-of-thumb approaches, and precision, while devaluing the importance of trust in relationships. A's seemed to enjoy spontaneity and evoked more interaction with others than did B's. They were also more other-oriented, nondogmatic, and empathic, while B's were more self-oriented, dogmatic, concerned with rules and procedures, and judgmental. It seemed, therefore, that the A-B Scale showed

promise as an indicator of supportive and defensive communicators.

If such types could be identified, it seemed logical to conclude that, given a situation in which either style might be an appropriate one, such differences would be perceivable. Moreover, following Kelley and Stahelski's (1970) second conclusion, one might reasonably predict that the two types would differ in terms of how they perceived each other and their situations as a function of type.

The characteristics of supportive and defensive communication situations have been described conceptually, though little empirical evidence has been generated from these descriptions. Gibb (1961) offered the most complete situational description when he asserted that one or more of six dichotomous behaviors could lead to the perception of the situation as being supportive or defensive. These behavior pairs were: description/evaluation, problem-orientation/control, spontaneity/strategy, empathy/neutrality, equality/superiority, and provisionalism/certainty. Rogers (1962) echoed some of these descriptors when he described a "helping" situation as consisting of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy.

In a later article, Gibb (1964) laid the blame for failure to achieve supportive communication upon the uses of "persuasion" as opposed to "participation" in interactions with others. Gibb's definition of "persuasion" was vague, however, and he left unclear how "participation" did not involve the use of interpersonal influence.

A more recent article by Pearce (1974) has served to alleviate this confusion. According to Pearce, three characteristics exist in "trusting" situations: contingency, or potential for communicative risk; predictability, in terms of both the situation and the other participants in it; and the

perception of alternative options for behavior within the situation. If these characteristics exist, then perception of a source as being credible can create a cognitive state of trust. This state can be translated into trusting behavior through the exhibition of behavior which increases the vulnerability of one person to the other. In other words, interpersonal influence is an integral part of supportive communication except where one individual attempts to cut off the alternative options for behavior of the other. In fact, "persuasion," when employed in the former sense, could conceivably lead to an increase in perceptions of supportiveness. If one considers an act of cognitive realignment resulting from interpersonal influence as being behavior which "increases vulnerability to the other," then such realignment could result in trusting behavior, which, in turn, could heighten perceptions of supportiveness in the relationship.

To summarize, then, this study reasoned that perceptions of supportive and defensive communication could result from both trait and state conditions. Specifically, the following four hypotheses were advanced:

- H₁: Persons identified as being type "A" individuals will be perceived as having a more supportive style than persons identified as being type "B" individuals when placed in a situation where either supportive or defensive communication could occur.
- H₂: "A" individuals and "B" individuals will have differing perceptions of the relative supportiveness or defensiveness of their situation as a function of type.
- H₃: The attempted elimination of alternative options within a situation will result in an increase in perceptions of defensiveness within that situation.

H₄: Cognitive realignment with regard to the topic of discussion will result in an increase in perceptions of supportiveness within the situation.

METHOD

Subjects - Subjects were 120 university students enrolled in the basic course in speech communication. Subjects were selected for the study from the overall population of the course (N = 1833) through scores on the A-B Scale. All subjects received assignment credit for participation in the study.

Measures - The Schiffman, Carson, and Falkenberg (1967) version of the A-B Scale was employed in this study. This instrument consisted of fourteen items from the Strong Vocational Interest Blank, five items from the M.M.P.I., and one filler item. It was scored so that a low score signifies type "A" and a high score signifies type "B". A pilot study pitted the A-B Scale against the Repression-Sensitization Scale in an attempt to discover whether any relationship existed between the two. A correlational analysis of 33 subjects' responses to both scales yielded a coefficient of $-.18$. Clearly, the two scales are measures of different traits. The A-B Scale is included as Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

A measure of defensive and supportive communication was constructed for this study by the researcher. This instrument consisted of twelve bipolar adjectives modeled on the semantic differential format.¹ The adjectives were selected from a pool formed through generating synonyms to

descriptive terms used in the Gibb (1961) article. A panel of five judges who were familiar with Gibb's formulations placed each adjective pair into one of Gibb's six behavior categories. Agreement of three of the five judges was considered sufficient for inclusion of the item in the instrument. Five non-evaluative filler items selected from a list provided by Osgood, Succi, and Tannenbaum (1957) were also included.

Procedures - The A-B Scale was administered to the subject population during the second class period of the term. The distribution of scores ranged from zero to nineteen and was approximately normal. The mean score was 9.297, and the standard deviation was 3.298. The reliability (KR-20) of the scale was computed to be .53.

Persons scoring zero through three were classified as "A" subjects, and persons scoring fifteen through nineteen were classified as "B" subjects. From each of these available pools, sixty subjects were selected at random to participate in the study. A single-blind method of selection was employed so that the experimenter was unaware of which subjects were A's and which were B's.

Once selected, subjects were randomly paired into sixty dyads. Thirty dyads consisted of same-type subjects (fifteen A-A dyads and fifteen B-B dyads), and thirty dyads consisted of opposite-type dyads. Once formed, two thirds of each grouping were assigned to the experimental condition, and one third were assigned to the control condition. By the time the study actually took place, over ten weeks had passed since the A-B Scale had been administered. Subjects were told that they had been selected for participation on the basis of "interests."

In order to create a situation in which contingency, predictability,

and alternative options would come into play, a discussion case, "The Kidney Machine Problem," (Pheiffer and Jones, 1974) was employed. As modified for this study, the case presented "personality profiles" of eight individuals who needed kidney machine treatment. Each profile contained both positive and negative aspects about that individual, and all profiles were about equally attractive. In each case, the instructions to the dyad stipulated that its task was to select one of the individuals for treatment by the end of the total time allotted for interaction. This situation provided contingency because the subjects were forced to disclose some of their values to each other in discussing their choices, it provided predictability because each subject started with the same information base, and it provided alternative options in terms of choices that could be advocated.

All subjects were instructed to discuss the personality profiles for ten minutes without eliminating any of the individuals from consideration. Following the first interaction period, the pairs were separated, and each subject rated their perceptions of the situation on the supportive-defensive scale. Following Laing, Phillipsen, and Lee's (1966) theoretical formulations regarding interpersonal perception, subjects completed each of the items for three concepts: "Myself, during the past ten minutes," "My partner, during the past ten minutes," and "What my partner thinks of me." To control for order effects, the items were randomly arranged for each of the concepts. Subjects also completed a preference measure on which the eight case choices were listed; subjects indicated in rank order their two most acceptable and two least acceptable choices.

At this point in the study, the experimental manipulation was performed. In all dyads, one subject was left in the discussion room and one subject

was taken out of the room to complete the questionnaire. In treatment dyads, the experimenter collected the questionnaire set from the subject who had been taken out of the room first. This subject was then told to wait until the experimenter had collected the questionnaire from the other dyad member. Returning to the discussion room, the experimenter collected the other questionnaire, then told the subject that the "true" nature of the study was to determine how the partner would react during the next interaction period. The subject was then requested to advocate one of the eight choices as the dyad's decision. While the experimenter appeared to be selecting the choice to be advocated randomly, he actually named the choice that the partner had indicated was next-to-least acceptable. By so doing, it was reasoned that the alternative options portion of the situation would be severely limited for both communicators. In all cases, the subject agreed to carry out the "deception." In the control condition, the dyad was re-formed and instructed to select their choice.

After the second ten-minute interaction period was completed, subjects were again separated in the same manner as previously and completed the same instruments as previously. This time, the presentation of the three concepts to be rated was also randomly arranged. Once the subjects had completed the second questionnaire, they were debriefed by the experimenter, and their questions about the study were answered fully. Subjects were also given an opportunity to learn whether they had been classified as type "A" or type "B" after the study had been concluded; only one subject took advantage of this opportunity.

RESULTS

In order to obtain a unidimensional scale for analysis, the supportive-defensive instrument was submitted to item analysis. Items which correlated at less than .20 with total score were eliminated from further consideration.² The reliability (coefficient alpha) of the supportive-defensive instrument was computed to be .92.

Hypothesis one was tested by comparing initial interaction ratings of A's and B's by their partners by means of a t-test. As predicted, "A" subjects were perceived to be significantly more supportive than were "B" subjects ("A" mean = 52.52; "B" mean = 48.20; t = 2.94, $p < .01$; possible range = 10-70).

Hypothesis two was tested by summing across the three concepts and testing via a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 3 factorial ANOVA with three between and two within dimensions. The extremely complex design was employed so that differences between the two administrations of the questionnaire and among the three concepts being rated could be checked. The three between dimensions were: treatment/control, type (A or B), and cognitive realignment (yes or no). For purposes of this study, cognitive realignment was defined as change (except to least acceptable) of the next-to-least acceptable choice from the first questionnaire to the second.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 summarizes the main effects and key interactions of this analysis. It should be noted that despite the significant within effects for testing and for concepts, there was no main effect for type, nor were there any significant interactions between type and either of the within factors.

Thus, Hypothesis two was not supported.

Though Hypothesis three could have been tested from the individual point of view, as depicted in Table 2, it is also instructive to look at it from the dyad point of view. In such an analysis, overall ratings of the second questionnaire were summed across partners and entered into a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial analysis of covariance, with the ratings on the first questionnaire being held as the covariate. That analysis is presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

As in the individual ratings, a strong overall effect for treatment can be noticed. With a range of possible scores from 64 - 448, the mean for the treatment group was 280.33, and the mean for the control group was 332.74. Consequently, Hypothesis three was supported.

In the case of Hypothesis four, support was or was not present depending upon the analysis selected. In the analysis of individual perceptions (Table 2), no difference was noted. In the analysis of dyad perceptions (Table 3), however, where cognitive realignment was considered to be present if either partner met the operational definition for such realignment, marginal support was present (mean for realigned dyads = 304.26, $n = 38$; mean for nonrealigned dyads = 286.65, $n = 22$).

Insert Table 4 about here

It is also interesting to examine the analysis of the concept, "my partner, during the past ten minutes" (Table 4), in which one finds significant effects only for the treatment-testing interaction and a three-way

interaction involving treatment, realignment, and testing. Though a Newman-Keuls test among the means found no significant differences, the directional indications are tantalizing. In the treatment condition, subjects who realigned perceived their partners as being more defensive on the second test (first test mean = 5.29, second test mean = 4.75), while those who did not realign did not shift their perceptions either (first test mean = 4.75, second test mean = 4.69). In the control condition, however, the opposite was true, with realigners shifting in a supportive direction (first test mean = 4.74, second test mean = 5.05), while nonrealigners remained steady (first test mean = 5.19, second test mean = 5.22). As a result of these analyses, it would be safe to contend that Hypothesis four was supported, albeit marginally.

DISCUSSION

From the evidence presented by the results of this study, we are led to conclude that supportive and defensive communication can be manifested through either "trait" or "state" conditions. Too, the nature of the results provides us with some clues as to how supportive and defensive communication is created.

The support for Hypothesis one suggests that a supportive or a defensive style can be attributed to certain characteristic modes of behavior. In fact, such modes are easily discernible; subjects were able to make discriminations with strangers based on only ten minutes of interaction.

The use of the A-B Scale in its present form to make such trait predictions is somewhat problematic, however, due to that instrument's relatively low internal reliability. While this difficulty was overcome

in the present study by testing a large initial group and selecting only the extreme cases for inclusion in the research, the scale must be refined if it is to be of any use in predicting levels of supportive and defensive communication behavior across situations.

The total lack of support for Hypothesis two suggests that Kelley and Stahelski's (1970) conclusion regarding cooperative and competitive individuals does not hold for persons who tend to be either defensive or supportive communicators. Such a finding could indicate that attribution theorists are mistaken when they claim that an individual's tendency is to perceive others as being similar to himself or herself, but the more likely explanation is that situational forces are stronger determinants of supportive or defensive communication than are habitual style preferences. Indeed, dyad pairings in the present study tended to bear out such a conclusion. While A-A dyads did tend to establish supportive climates and while B-B dyads did tend to establish defensive climates, pairing alone was not a particularly reliable predictor of the type of climate that was initially established.

What turned out to be thoroughly predictable, however, was the hypothesis that attempts to eliminate alternative options within the situation would produce significant increases in perceptions of the dyad's communication as being more defensive. While control subjects perceived their communication as being more or less the same after the second ten minutes as after the first ten minutes, those dyads in which advocacy of an undesirable alternative accompanied by a refusal to compromise occurred found that the level of defensive communication escalated rapidly.

The role of cognitive realignment as a result of communicative behavior within the situation seems to be an intervening one in favor of counteracting

forces pushing the dyad towards defensive communication. Yet, the nature of how such an intervention occurs remains unclear from these data. It is possible that individuals realign in order to avoid the threats of defensiveness. It is also possible that the perceptual changes in the direction of supportiveness come as the result of tension release following the resolution of conflict (in this case, deciding that one alternative was more desirable than had been originally thought). Previous perception of the climate might also influence whether or not realignment will occur and on what grounds it might occur. In the case of perceptions of the other, it seems as though both those who refused to shift under the treatment condition and those who shifted under the control condition perceived their partners initially as being more defensive than did any of the other subjects. Such an awareness on the part of the other in the control condition might have led to a change in strategy, setting up the realignment. In the treatment condition, such a change was not possible, and so, neither perceptions nor cognitions changed.

All of this speculation must, of course, lead to the inevitable call for additional research. In this writer's mind, such research must focus on the interactions among trait, state, and the resultant perceptions generated from such interactions. The questions open to potential investigation might include the following:

(1) What specific sets of behavior allow an individual to be "typed" as being a supportive or a defensive communicator? Recent research by Civikly, Face, and Krause (1977) has found several individual verbal and nonverbal behaviors that distinguished supportive from defensive portions of social service interviews. While such research is both valuable and needed, it

does little to tell us how these individual behaviors fit together to form that gestalt impression of a communicator as being supportive or defensive. Additional research should probe these combinations and permutations further.

(2) Do supportive or defensive communicators seek out or avoid certain situations, and if so, what factors distinguish these situations from each other? If the tendency to be a supportive or a defensive communicator follows the patterns of other communicative traits, it is logical to conclude that there are some situations that will be sought out or avoided by each "type." Daly and McCroskey (1975), for example, found that individuals who were high in communication apprehension tended to favor certain occupations over others. Too, the A-B Scale is in large part based on measures of occupational preference. If defensive and supportive communicators can be shown to prefer differing occupational situations, an analysis of the key differences in these situations might provide valuable insight into the conditions under which each type is best able to cope. The same type of analysis might be applied to interpersonal situations as well.

(3) When confronted with the same situation, are there systematic differences in the manner in which supportive and defensive communicators deal with situational exigences? Although the writer knows of no research that has been done in this area to date, one anecdotal piece of evidence from the present study suggests that supportive and defensive communicators do concoct different strategies for dealing with similar situations. In observing the interaction of treatment dyads through a one-way mirror, the writer noted three fairly consistent communicative strategies being employed by those who were cast in the advocacy role. One strategy, adopted by A's regardless of who was their partner, involved rapid exchange of interaction,

short statements, and an argument-counterargument pattern. The second strategy was adopted by B's who had A partners and consisted of the advocate monopolizing the conversation, allowing little time for the partner to make more than a brief response. The final strategy, adopted by B's with B partners, had the advocate sitting back and allowing the other to talk, though steering the conversation toward the advocated position with leading questions. If this kind of evidence could be gathered under more rigorous conditions, it might bring us a long way toward a greater understanding of the nature of defensive and supportive communication.

(4) How do intervening variables affect perceptions of communication as being supportive or defensive? The difficulty in interpreting the results with regard to cognitive realignment and its effect on the perceptual process within the dyad raises a complex and difficult issue. What variables intervene in creating impressions of supportive or defensive communication? Are these variables situational or transsituational? Are they dependent, independent, or interdependent with the perceptual process? At this point, it appears that a better understanding of trait and state qualities of defensive and supportive communication is needed before such questions can be tackled.

In summary, this paper has attempted to argue that supportive and defensive communication as both individual and situational characteristics. Discovering the exact nature and relationships among these characteristics can provide fertile ground for cultivation by communication researchers.

NOTES

¹The twelve pairs were: EQUAL/UNEQUAL, WARM/COLD, OPENMINDED/CLOSEMINDED, ACCEPTING/BLAMING, SPONTANEOUS/SCHEMING, NONMANIPULATIVE/MANIPULATIVE, COOPERATIVE/ARGUMENTATIVE, CARING/INDIFFERENT, UNDERSTANDING/JUDGING, COLLABORATING/CONTROLLING, NOT STATUS-CONSCIOUS/STATUS-CONSCIOUS, and CONCERNED/UNCONCERNED.

²The eliminated pairs were NONMANIPULATIVE/MANIPULATIVE for all three concepts and NOT STATUS-CONSCIOUS/STATUS-CONSCIOUS for the concept, "my partner, during the past ten minutes."

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TABLE 1

The A-B Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: For each of the following items, please respond in terms of the degree of interest you would have in each of the relevant activities, school subjects, or occupations by placing a mark in the appropriate column. Work rapidly.

	<u>Like</u>	<u>Indifferent</u>	<u>Dislike</u>
1. Ship Officer	(*)	()	()
2. Mechanical engineer	(*)	(*)	()
3. Photoengraver	(*)	(*)	()
4. Toolmaker	(*)	(*)	()
5. Making a radio set	(*)	(*)	()
6. Building contractor	(*)	()	()
7. Looking at shop windows	(*)	()	()
8. Marine engineer	(*)	(*)	()
9. Mechanical drawing	(*)	()	()
10. Manual training (military weapons)	(*)	()	()
11. Adjusting a carburetor	(*)	()	()
12. Cabinet making	(*)	()	()
13. Carpenter	(*)	()	()

Answer the following items as truthfully as possible by marking the appropriate column.

	<u>True</u>	<u>False</u>
14. I think I would like the kind of work a forest ranger does.	(*)	()
15. I like mechanics magazines.	(*)	()
16. In school, I was sometimes sent to the principal for cutting up.	(*)	()
17. It does not bother me that I am not better looking.	(*)	()
18. People often disappoint me.	()	(*)
19. I have mechanical ingenuity (inventiveness).	(*)	()
20. I am good at finding my way around unfamiliar places.	()	()

* indicates "B" response.

TABLE 2

Between-within ANOVA of summed climate scores

<u>Source</u>	<u>d.f.</u>	<u>Mean Square</u>	<u>F</u>
Treatment (A)	1	25.066	10.9204**
Type (B)	1	3.482	1.5171
Cognitive realignment (C)	1	1.341	.5843
Error	112	2.295	
Questionnaire administrations (D)	1	5.564	5.9511*
A x D	1	12.716	13.3942***
Error	112	.949	
Concepts (E)	2	3.754	7.6645***
A x E	2	2.234	4.5614*
Error	224	.490	
D x E	2	.714	3.3265*
Error	224	.214	
Total	719	.782	

no other significant interactions

*p < .05

**p < .01

***p < .001

TABLE 3

Covariance analysis of summed climate scores

<u>Source</u>	<u>d.f.</u>	<u>Mean Square</u>	<u>F</u>
Covariates	1	28594.828	29.106***
Treatment	1	31328.590	31.888***
Type	1	13.120	.013
Cognitive realignment	1	3760.395	3.828*
Error	51	982.443	
Total	59	1870.995	

no significant interactions

*p < .05

***p < .001

TABLE 4

Between-within ANOVA of "partner" concept

<u>Source</u>	<u>d.f.</u>	<u>Mean Square</u>	<u>F</u>
Treatment (A)	1	1.381	1.3143
Type (B)	1	.310	.2950
Cognitive realignment (C)	1	.000	.0001
Error	112	1.051 ^{-a}	
Questionnaire administrations (D)	1	.178	.4808
A x D	1	2.322	6.2868*
A x C x D	1	1.469	3.9757*
Error	112	.369	
Total	239	.703	

no other significant interactions

*p < .05